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SUBJECT: SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT IN FRANCE-ANGOLA RELATIONS

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, 1.4 (b/d
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¶1. (C) SUMMARY: MFA Angola desk officer Carole Blestel told us on September 26 that Angola was apparently seeking to improve relations with France, citing the meeting between Presidents Dos Santos and Sarkozy on September 24 in New York. She said that Angola had initiated the meeting and that the Angolans no longer seemed to want to use the long-running investigation of the Falcone Affair (a complex allegedly illicit arms trading case dating from the Mitterrand era) as a reason for distancing Angola from France. Blestel said that the MFA was planning for Sarkozy to travel to Angola in 2008, with a lower-level delegation likely to go to Angola before then to set the stage for the presidential visit. Legal proceedings against 42 defendants (including ex-Interior Minister Charles Pasqua and former AF Presidential Advisor Jean-Christophe Mitterrand (son of the former president) in connection with the Falcone Affair may begin in 2008. Blestel asked whether the U.S. would send election observers to Angola for the 2008 legislative and 2009 presidential elections, and whether the U.S. still intended to open a presence post in Cabinda. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) We met with MFA Angola desk officer Carole Blestel on September 26 to discuss the significance of the September 24 meeting between French President Sarkozy and Angolan President Dos Santos on the margins of the UNGA. Blestel said that the meeting was a friendly one and she confirmed Sarkozy's statements after the meeting that the two sides intended to improve relations. She said that Dos Santos invited Sarkozy to visit Angola during the early part of 2008 and that Sarkozy, in principle, accepted the invitation. The MFA would begin planning the visit in conjunction with Angolan counterparts. As Sarkozy stated to the press, a lower-level delegation, likely led by Jean-Marie Bockel (State Secretary for Cooperation and Francophonie) would make an advance visit, probably before the end of 2007.

The Falcone Affair and Its Repercussions

¶3. (C) Blestel said this turn toward improved relations might finally mark an end to the unfortunate and lengthy period of poor relations caused by the Falcone Affair, the still-murky case dating from the Mitterrand years involving arms sales to Angola, engineered by Pierre Joseph Falcone and many others. In April 2007, a French judge investigating the case sent it forward to the Paris Correctional Tribunal, clearing the way for further legal proceedings against 42 defendants, including former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua and Jean-Christophe Mitterrand, a son of the former president and AF-advisor at the Presidency during much of his father's term of office. Blestel, adopting a "let the chips fall where they may" attitude, said she hoped the trial would begin as scheduled in 2008 and that it would reach some conclusion within a reasonable time, although she acknowledged the tendency of such cases to drag on forever. She doubted whether Falcone, a fugitive whose whereabouts were unknown, would actually appear in court.

14. (C) The Falcone Affair, which also came to be called "Angolagate," involved transgressions on a number of levels, Blestel explained, including kickbacks, money-laundering, bribes, a failure to properly document arms sales, tax evasion and fraud, and similar illegalities. The 42 defendants were accused of having carried out a mix of these activities. Many, including JC Mitterrand, had already been in and out of court (and jail, in several cases, including Mitterrand's) a number of times over the years in connection with the case.

15. (C) The Falcone Affair damaged relations because it cast Angola, the buyer of the arms, in a negative light and as a necessary participant in or accessory to illegal activities. Blestel said that Angola's decision to chill relations was essentially a result of embarrassment and a loss of face once its role in the affair was revealed. Moreover, the Angolans always believed that the French Government must have been aware of, if not directly involved in, the affair, especially given the roles of figures such as Pasqua and JC Mitterrand, and were angry that the GOF, in their view, denied involvement. Blestel believed, which she hoped the trial would confirm, that there was never any involvement on the part of the GOF and that any of the defendants who may have been officials during the affair had been acting in their individual capacities, although they certainly might have been guilty of abuse of office.

6 (C) When asked why the change in Angola's position, Blestel said that it appeared the Angolans were beginning to understand that their reluctance to deal with France had long ago become unproductive and that there was much to gain by improving relations. She also believed that the Angolans

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were starting to understand that the GOF was not involved in the affair and that the trial of the 42 defendants was in itself a positive sign that France was serious about going after those whose activities had proved damaging to both Angola's and France's broader interests. The Angolans took advantage of the UNGA to reach out to Sarkozy, and his willingness to move forward rather than dwell on the past matched Angolan hopes, Blestel explained.

Subdued French Posture in Angola

17. (C) Blestel said that France in recent years had maintained a low profile in Angola. If relations improved, she expected that one area of interest would be restarting French economic and development assistance. An additional unfortunate result of the Falcone Affairs was Angola's decision not to repay certain debts owed to France for loan-based assistance the French had provided before. Blestel said that the debt issue would have to be resolved (either through repayment, forgiveness, or restructuring) before France could provide new assistance. She said that despite the French Embassy's low profile in Luanda, it was sufficiently staffed to allow for a rapid expansion in activities should relations indeed move forward.

U.S and Angola

18. (C) Blestel asked whether the U.S. planned on sending elections observers to Angola to monitor the legislative elections in 2008 and 2009. She also asked for information about the opening of a small presence post in Cabinda. (We have e-mailed AF/S for information on these two inquiries, and a reply by e-mail would be sufficient to allow us to respond to her.) Blestel said that the Alliance Francaise educational/cultural organization maintained an office in Cabinda, noting that Cabinda was home to a fair number of francophone Angolans and residents from neighboring francophone countries.

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